

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

4 November 2016

Spanish school and college students strike

School pupils as young as 14 and college students left their classrooms across Spain on October 26 to protest against the reintroduction of an exam system from the era of the Franco dictatorship. The 2 million who struck joined parents and teachers in 70 demonstrations nationwide.

Without passing this exam, students cannot graduate, and those from working class backgrounds are penalised because their parents cannot afford to finance the extra tuition to ensure they pass.

The measures were first proposed by the Popular Party government of Mariano Rajoy three years ago. For the last 10 months, Spain has had no government. Last month, parliament voted the return of Rajoy as prime minister for a second term. The PSOE (Socialist Party) abstained in the vote, allowing the PP to return to power.

Portuguese refuse workers in dispute over pay, collective bargaining and privatisation

Refuse workers in the Portuguese capital Lisbon, refused to remove rubbish on Monday morning and again on Tuesday. They are demanding higher wages, which have been frozen since 2009, and the right to free collective bargaining. Refuse workers also face the threat of privatization. A spokesman for the Valorsul trade union justified keeping the issues separate, calling them “different battles.”

Irish secondary school teachers strike

Last Thursday, 500 secondary schools (post-11 years) closed their doors as teachers struck to demand an increase in pay and improved working conditions. The strike is the first of a number of weekly one-day strikes proposed up until December.

Before the strike began, the Fine Gael government threatened financial penalties against teachers who refused to work additional hours. The teachers are members of the Association of Secondary School Teachers Ireland (ASTI). The other teachers union, the TUI, whose members work alongside ASTI staff, refused to call out their members.

The school management companies are planning to bring in scabs at €20 an hour to cover for teachers who refuse to do supervision duties.

Fujitsu workers strike in Manchester, England

IT services workers employed at computer conglomerate Fujitsu in Manchester, England began a three-day strike Tuesday.

The 300 Unite union members are demanding better overall pay, pensions and job security. Last month, Fujitsu announced that 1,800 jobs may be axed at its locations across the UK. The company has three sites in the north west of England—Manchester, Warrington and Crewe.

Fujitsu also announced that pensions have been retroactively reduced by 15 percent for people over 60.

Unite regional officer Sharon Hutchinson said, “The Fujitsu management needs to enter into a constructive dialogue on the issues that cause our members serious concern—otherwise more industrial action is on the cards.” A 48-hour stoppage beginning on November 7 is planned by Unite, pending settlement of the dispute.

Unions call off strike by UK Equality and Human Rights Commission employees

This week, two unions, the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) and Unite, called off a scheduled strike threatened by Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) employees.

The strike was due to go ahead on October 26, but was called off when the unions agreed to talks with management at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service.

The EHRC faces budget cuts of 25 percent, which would mean compulsory redundancies of some of its 190 workers. Members of the PCS backed a strike by a 4-to-1 majority and other forms of action by a 9-to-1 majority on a turnout of 64 percent.

Crown Post Office workers strike in England

One thousand Crown Post Office workers struck on Monday for 24 hours to protest job cuts, privatisation, and attacks on pensions. The company intends to replace its final salary pension scheme with an inferior average salary based scheme.

This was the second strike held in October. In order to limit the action, the Communication Workers Union and Unite unions only called workers out in the larger Post Office branches on the high street, although 3,000 workers in 300 branches nationally are involved.

In central London, as part of the protest, a coffin was paraded around Parliament Square by a horse-drawn cortege to symbolise the death of the Post Office, which was initially established in England by King Charles II in 1660.

Southern Rail conductors set to strike again

Conductors on Southern GTR (Govia Thameslink Railway) are set to walk out this weekend in what will be the eighth strike this year against management plans to impose driver only trains (DOO).

The firm is attempting the forcible transformation of conductors—trained in over 35 safety critical tasks—into “on board supervisors” focused entirely on revenue collection. The plan will result in vital door operation responsibility being forced on to the driver.

Conductors have protested the plans since April, holding 15 days of strikes. Southern GTR, the largest private rail franchise in the UK, has issued three-month termination of contract notices to all conductors who refuse to sign the new contracts by December 31.

The Rail, Maritime Transport union (RMT) have advised its members to accept the new contracts without even putting it to a vote. The legal advice came ahead of a three-day strike that began October 11 and is the most blatant effort yet by the RMT to end strikes at Southern and enforce the changes demanded by management.

Bus workers strike in Israel

Bus workers employed at Egged bus services, the largest bus company in Israel, struck this week. On Wednesday, nearly 2,000 bus drivers protested outside the Finance Ministry in the country’s capital, Jerusalem.

A spokesman for Egged said that the government was withholding subsidies of NIS 250 million (US\$65 million). The reason for this, he said, was that the government is pressing the company to establish its workforce as contract labour.

The bus company’s 6,000 drivers provide transport to local and intercity passengers and withdrawal of these services is expected to cause congestion on the roads. The removal of subsidies will also affect those that can least afford increased fares.

In interviews with the *Times of Israel*, drivers confirmed the company spokesman’s remarks. They went on to say they already worked a 12-hour day, and have to work Fridays in order to make a living.

A representative of the Histadut union federation said if there is no solution before November 7, an all-out strike would be called.

South African platinum miners union settles for inferior pay deal

The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) have reached an inferior wage settlement with the South African platinum industry. Workers employed at the main three platinum industry employers—Amplats, Impala Platinum and Lonmin—are involved.

AMCU initially put in a wage claim of around 50 percent for the lowest paid workers, to bring the basic wage up to R12,500 or just over \$900 a month. In the end, the AMCU agreed to a settlement with the three firms of just 7 to 12.5 percent, to be implemented over three years. Overtime rates of pay are also reduced in the agreement.

AMCU became the miners’ representatives as the workers regard the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) as a company union. In 2012, following the Marikana massacre of striking miners, in which the NUM was complicit, many workers left it and joined AMCU, which was campaigning for a minimum wage of R12,500.

Zimbabwean sugar workers jobs threatened

Members of sugar workers unions in Zimbabwe demonstrated last week against threatened job losses. Workers employed by Tonglaat Hullet in Chiredzi town, Masvingo province, protested at the possible loss of 2,500 jobs out of a permanent workforce of 16,000.

The Zimbabwe Sugar Milling Workers Union and the Sugar Production and Milling Workers Union are opposing the hiving off of 4,000 hectares of Tonglaat Hullet farms to 138 independent farmers. The union claims this will lose workers their jobs.

Nigerian oil workers union threatens action over job losses

The National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG) is threatening to organise protests in three weeks, if Nigeria’s government does not intervene over job losses in the industry. Around 3,000 jobs have been lost since the collapse in the price of oil. The union says that the oil companies are closing down.

NUPENG only proposes a protest and demonstrations, stating it did not want to call out its members in industrial action.

The country’s oil production rose to 1.9 million bpd (barrels per day) this month from a low point of 1.1 million in July.

Algerian public-sector strike escalates

Algerian public sector workers came out on strike this week for two days. Up to 85 percent of government employees were involved in the stoppage. This was an increase from the numbers participating in last week’s strike.

The action is in response to government attacks on pensions, including the right to take early retirement. The attacks are being imposed as part of the government’s austerity programme.

Among those on strike were doctors, medical practitioners and teachers, who are members of 16 trade unions across the public sector. Hostility is growing to the government’s intransigence in imposing cuts and the strike is expected to grow over into the private sector.



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